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ABSTRACT

It is an open question whether popular culture courses are effective sites in which to instill the kinds of critical media literacies that might contribute to students acting in support of social justice in their everyday lives. A course called "The Uses of Popular Culture" focuses on contemporary multicultural American society to understand the variety of roles that popular culture can play in forming and expressing contemporary identities. The course begins with an introduction to historical and contemporary debates about the meanings and uses of popular culture. The remainder of the course considers a variety of forms of popular culture and several pivotal media events of the 1980s and 1990s to ask how race, class, and gender are constructed. Students' reactions to the course are quite varied. Some students seem disappointed that serious political questions are the focus of the course. Other students demonstrate a lack of enthusiasm for class discussion except when focused on debating the merits of heavy metal music and which group was superior. A common reaction from students is resistance, which is most apparent when the discussion focuses on race relations. (Contains 15 references.) (RS)

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Teaching for Social Change--Mission 'Possible'? Cultural Studies

Approaches to Teaching Popular Culture

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M. Banning

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In his study of Cibecue Apache people, Keith Basso (1996) reports that the Cibecue people view Anglo-American history as "a history without voices to thrust it into the present. Removed from the contexts of daily social life, it also seems unconnected to daily affairs and concerns; it is a history without discernable applications" (p. 33). History, I think, should have "discernable applications" and accordingly, I teach my history of popular culture course with the hopes that the course will make new connections in the daily lives of my students. Several commitments to cultural studies shape my view of popular culture. Most centrally, I view popular culture as a key site in which to examine the construction of everyday life, but especially to consider the power relations that constitute everyday life (cf. Brantlinger, 1990, 1992; Chow, 1993; Fiske, 1993, 1996; Pollack, 1992; Turner, 1990). My concurrent belief in the pedagogical salience of critical media studies and critical literacy also shape my approach to this course (cf. Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999; Flanagan, 1997; Luke, 1997). In the course I discuss, The Uses of Popular Culture, we focus

primarily on contemporary multicultural American society to understand the variety of roles that popular culture can play in forming and expressing contemporary identities.

It has become increasingly apparent to me, however, that it is an open question whether popular culture courses are effective sites in which to examine and challenge how U.S. social relations are inequitably structured. Although I hope these courses can assist students in becoming more critically literate about the inequitable relations that exist amongst U.S. groups, students' reactions to the course are quite varied. Some students seem disappointed that serious political questions are the focus of the course. These students seem reluctant to let go of views of popular culture as a topic that is not to be taken seriously, as exemplified by the student who wistfully said in the eighth week of the term that he thought the course was going to be about sports. Other students demonstrate a lack of enthusiasm for class discussion except when class conversation focused on debating the merits of heavy metal music and which group was superior. A common reaction from students is resistance. This resistance is most apparent when the discussion

focuses on race relations. Students' resistance has led me to question whether, how, or when the popular culture course I teach might be an effective site for social action.

Before discussing the kinds of resistance students offer, let me elaborate on my pedagogy. I begin the course by introducing historical and contemporary debates about the meanings and uses of popular culture. We primarily review the perspectives offered by the Frankfort School critics, Frank Raymond Leavis and his followers, and cultural studies. From the start of the course, I point out that cultural studies perspectives inform most of the course materials. Besides wanting students to understand the nature and scope of the contestation over the meaning and significance of popular culture, we start here because I want students to understand that debate, disagreement, and their personal perspectives are not only welcome, but essential to class discussion. For the remainder of the course, we consider a variety of forms of popular culture and several pivotal media events of the 1980s and 90s to ask how race, class, and gender are constructed. Whether examining break-dancing, rap music, heavy metal, mainstream media

representations, or alternative media, we focus on understanding what these suggest about the identity of, and relations between, different groups in the U.S.

Pedagogies are always situated by a number of factors besides their explicit curriculum, including the institutional context, student body, teachers, and cultural environment. Like the majority of higher education institutions in the U.S., Northern Arizona University has a primarily white faculty--of which I am a member--and a largely white student body. However, it is located close to the Navajo and Hopi Nations, among others, and so it has a sizable American Indian student population relative to other state institutions across the nation. But while I often have native and other students of color in the other courses that I teach, such as my women's studies course, Women, Race, and Class, or my honors course, Identity and Place, the students in my popular culture courses have primarily been white. And, when discussing race, and particularly, white privilege, these students consistently produce resistance.

Let me offer a few examples of what I am terming "resistance" from class discussions and writing assignments. While discussing Black Liberation Radio as it is introduced to us by Fiske (1996), a number of students have strong negative reactions to the radio's critique of white power. Black Liberation Radio operates out of the John Hay Homes housing project and is run by Mbanna Kantako, a Black man blinded by a police beating in 1986. Kantako started the station in order give voice to his community and to make the repression of Black speech more widely known. The station, however, is low-tech and actually reaches only 3 or 4 square miles of Springfield, Illinois. One white male student in his early twenties, responds to Kantako's critique of white influences on African American identity and economy by writing:

> Speaking from factual knowledge, other Black people in America do not wish to hear the tears and whining of radicals like Kantako and Farrakhan. In 1995, a group of Texas oil tycoons got together to offer a one-way trip back to Africa, no questions asked, no re-payment

necessary. Not one of the people who claim that they want to return to their "Mother Country" of Africa accepted the offer.

While other student responses are less flamboyantly vitriolic, a number simply respond by stating that racial inequity is not important to them because it does not affect them directly. Some students feel excluded when learning of the community basis for hip hop culture, or the uses made of break dancing by Navajo and Ute high school students to express group solidarity and empowerment (Deyhle, 1986). A young white woman from southern California, for example, responded to these discussions of the uses of popular culture for solidarity by asking with some frustration, "But what about white power?"

A number of students also suggest that explicit discussion of race relations only will contribute to heightening racial tensions in the country. This thinking was exemplified by a white male student who wrote "thinking of this sort creates more of a standoff between both races instead of a greater understanding of each other. I think that if we learn more about each other and focus less on our flaws then we could enjoy each others (sic) cultural

differences." These are just some examples of what I refer to as student resistance in the course.

I think there are numerous ways to react to, and to make sense of, these student reactions. As a white educator, I believe I have an ethical duty to discuss white privilege with white students, and not leave the full burden of discussing race relations in this country to educators of color. It seems that my white students believe that since I share in the multiple benefits of white privilege, they can honestly express their resentment and frustration to me in discussions of race relations and race privilege. My racial positioning may influence the potential to open further dialogue with these students.

As I noted, however, some students believed that open dialogue about racism and explicit discussion of race privilege actively contributes to racism. Although these students believe that explicit discussion of race relations and privilege is racist, I understand these beliefs about "color-blindness" themselves to be strategies of white privilege that need to be critically examined and historically situated in class discussions.

Ruth Frankenberg (1993) points out that color-blind discourses on race arose during the Civil Rights period that began in the1950s in response to the dominant racial discourse of overt or essential racism. Essential racist discourses are premised on the belief that white supremacy is justified by biological superiority and sanctified by Christianity. Despite the laudable goal of color-blind discourses to challenge essential racism, however, in its efforts to not notice racial difference, color-blind discourses can not directly challenge the negative representations of and characterizations about people of color that are embedded in essential racism. In other words, attempts to not notice race such as those Patricia Williams illustrates (1991) with her white colleagues' comments that they do not notice she is Black, imply and reaffirm that there is something inherently negative about being Black.

Frankenberg observes that the insistence that discussions of American society remain color-blind helps to maintain "a white self innocent of racism" that allows speakers to avoid discussion of the power differences in the U.S. (p. 188). Color-blind discourses on race suggest that racial differences are not constructed along the lines of relations of power, but are

a result of cultural group characteristics or individualistic preferences. Both of these impulses to avoid discussion of the cultural and structural components of U.S. racism can be seen in the student's comment that "if we focus less on our flaws then we could enjoy each others (sic) cultural differences." Race relations are reduced to individualistic 'flaws' and cultural differences. Color-blind discourses are aided in their obfuscation of race relations in the U.S. by widespread belief in notions of meritocracy and rugged individualism. Notions of meritocracy suggest that people succeed or fail solely as a result of their own effort, and rugged individualism suggests that people succeed without any support from others. These combine with color-blind discourses to obscure institutional racism while placing the blame for inequity on those whom experience race and class oppression.

Students reading explicit critiques of color-blind discourse in the course, such as that offered by Leon Higginbothan, Jr. and his colleagues in Toni Morrison's edited volume on the O.J. Simpson trial (1997), are alternatively reluctant to accept, dismayed by, and sometimes horrified to

learn the degree to which the criminal justice system clearly is not color-blind. I end with a consideration of some of these moments that suggest that courses such as these can hold some potential to influence students to think critically about social inequity. Some students--confronted by the attempts to suppress the expression of Black Liberation Radio, with the evidence of the number of Black men in prison versus college, with the differential sentences give to Black versus white offenders, and with the story Lipsitz (1997) tells of Elmo Geronomo Pratt's trial and imprisonment--express frustration and despair with how these injustices contradict the fundamental tenets of democracy.

Students admitted resentment about having to know about Pratt's record as a decorated paratrooper in Vietnam, his subsequent involvement with the Black Panther Party on his return home, the suppression of key evidence in his trial that could have proven his innocence, and finally, his quarter of a century imprisonment. When I asked why, they responded that learning of his unjust treatment under the law created a contradiction for them that was coupled with a sense of despair. To paraphrase the words of a

white male student from southern Arizona, the knowledge of Pratt's unjust treatment was depressing and disturbing because it violates the basic principles of justice and freedom for which this country is supposed to stand. And, I might add, in which a number of these students still want to believe.

Are popular culture courses effective sites in which to instill the kinds of critical media literacies that might contribute to students acting in support of social justice in their everyday lives? I leave that as an open question. What I hope I have suggested are some of the predicaments that might complicate efforts towards these ends, as well as at least some of the possibilities that can exist.

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